6

Public Opinion and Political Action

Chapter Outline

The American People

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The New York Times Issues of the Times

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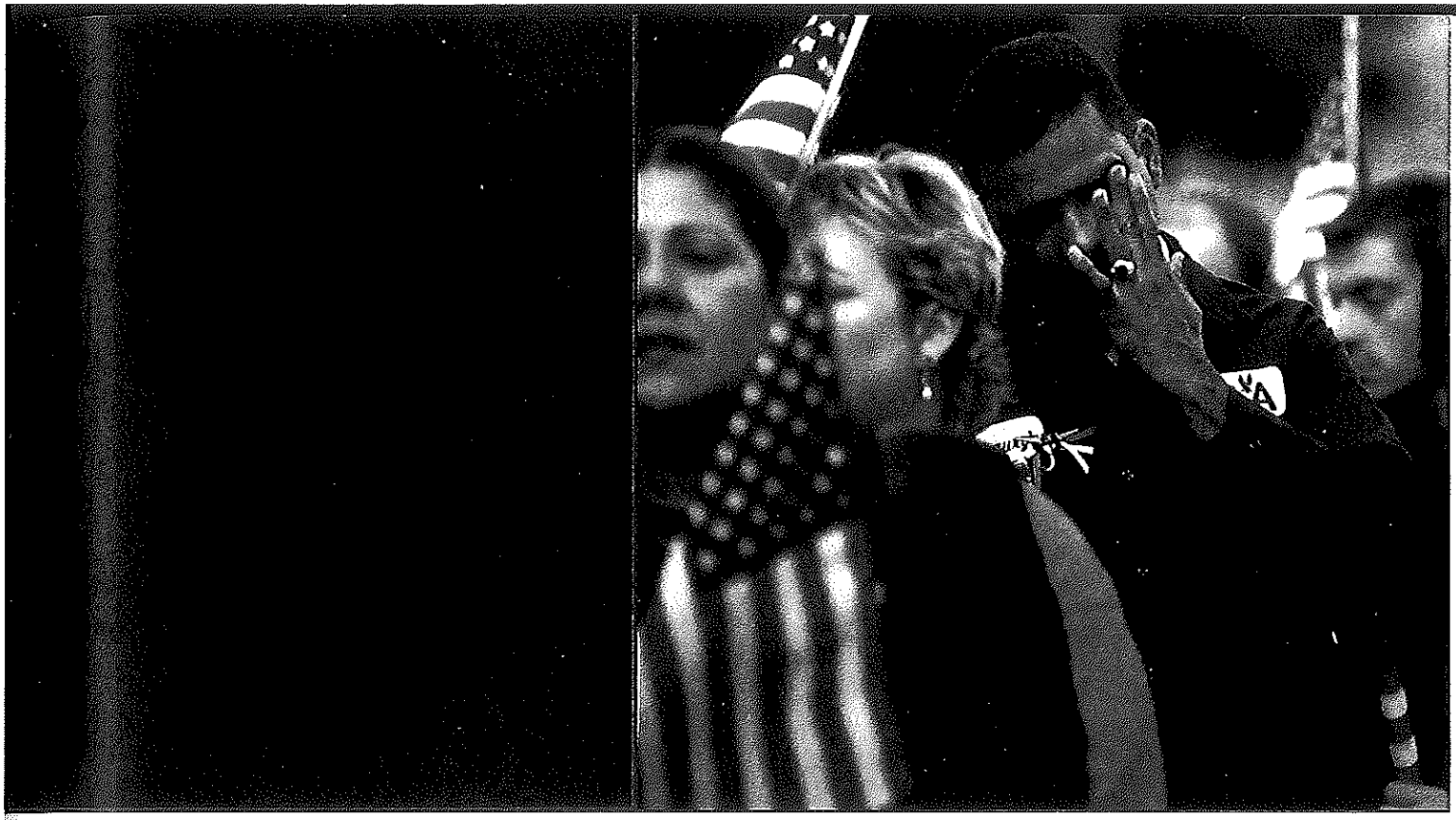
Summary

American public opinion about the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war in Afghanistan reflected a unanimity that is rarely seen. Normally, analysts find a great diversity of views among the American public, and public opinion surveys usually reveal many conflicting attitudes that frequently reflect ambivalence. But such was not the case in this instance. Hundreds of millions of Americans responded with remarkably near-unanimous opinions. Most everyone agreed that this was an act of war that demanded an immediate response by force. Partisan differences, racial differences, and regional differences mattered little in understanding attitudes about the events of September 11 and the war against terrorism.

A CNN/*USA Today* poll conducted on September 11, 2001, found that 86 percent felt that the attacks that day had been an act of war. A *Washington Post*/ABC poll conducted on September 13 found 93 percent favored military action when asked, "If the United States can identify the groups or nations responsible for the attacks,



would you support or oppose taking military action against them?" The same poll found that 85 percent favored striking at Afghanistan if Osama Bin Laden was found to be culpable and Afghanistan refused to turn him over. Support for military action dropped a bit when people were asked if it meant innocent civilians might be hurt or killed, and a bit more when posed with the scenario of a long war with large numbers of U.S. troops killed or injured. But 69 percent of the population nevertheless supported the use of force even under the conditions of Afghan civilian casualties and high military costs to the United States.

Not only did the vast majority of the American public immediately give their support for military action, they continued to support such action once hostilities commenced in Afghanistan. At *http://www.pollingreport.com* we found reports of 18 different public opinion polls that asked people whether they approved or disapproved of U.S. military action being taken in response to the terrorist attacks. The level of support was consistently high, ranging from 86 to 92 percent. Such support levels exceeded public support levels for the Persian Gulf War in 1991, which is typically thought of as an overwhelmingly supported military operation.

The case of September 11 is clearly an exception to the rule regarding public opinion. Usually, public opinion polls are taken to find out the level of disagreement in the country and what sorts of people favor which actions: As will be seen in this chapter, the degree of unanimity apparent in public opinion immediately after the terrorist attacks is most unusual.

Politicians and columnists commonly intone the words "the American people . . ." and then claim their view as that of the citizenry. Yet it would be hard to find a statement about the American people—who they are and what they believe—that is either 100 percent right or 100 percent wrong. The American people are wondrously diverse. There are about 295 million Americans, forming a mosaic of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. America was founded on the principle of tolerating diversity and individualism, and it remains one of the most diverse countries in the world today. Most Americans view this diversity as one of the most appealing aspects of their society.

public opinion

The distribution of the population's beliefs about politics and policy issues.

The study of American **public opinion** aims to understand the distribution of the population's belief about politics and policy issues. Because there are many groups with a great variety of opinions in the United States, this is an especially complex task. This is not to say that public opinion would be easy to study even if America were a more homogeneous society; as you will see, measuring public opinion involves painstaking interviewing procedures and careful wording of questions. Further complicating the task is the fact that people are often not well informed about the issues. The least informed are also the least likely to participate in the political process, a phenomenon that creates imbalances in who takes part in political action.

For American government to work efficiently and effectively, the diversity of the American public and its opinions must be faithfully channeled through the political process. This chapter reveals just how difficult this task is.

The American People

demography

The science of population changes.

census

A valuable tool for understanding demographic changes. The Constitution requires that the government conduct an "actual enumeration" of the population every ten years.

One way of looking at the American public is through **demography**—the science of human populations. The most valuable tool for understanding demographic changes in America is the **census.** The U.S. Constitution requires that the government conduct an "actual enumeration" of the population every ten years. The first census was conducted in 1790; the most recent census was done in 2000.

The Census Bureau tries to conduct the most accurate count of the population humanly feasible. It isn't an easy job, even with the allocation of billions of federal dollars to the task. After the 1990 Census was completed, the Bureau estimated that 4.7 million people were not counted. Furthermore, they found that members of minority groups were disproportionately undercounted, as they were apparently more suspicious of government and thus less willing to cooperate with census workers. In order to correct for such an undercount in 2000, the Clinton administration approved a plan to scientifically estimate the characteristics of those people who failed to respond to the census forms and follow-up visits from census workers, and then to incorporate this information into the official count. Conservatives maintained that such a procedure would be subject to manipulation, less accurate than a traditional head count, and unconstitutional. In the 1999 case of *Department of Commerce v. U.S. House of Representatives,* the Supreme Court ruled that sampling could not be used to determine the number of congressional districts each state is entitled to. However, the Court left the door open for the use of sampling procedures to adjust the count for other purposes, such as the allocation of federal grants to states. In the end, the Bush administration decided not to use the sampling option.

Changes in the U.S. population, as reflected in census figures, impact our culture and political system in numerous ways, which will be examined in the next few sections.

The Immigrant Society

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants. As John F. Kennedy said, America is "not merely a nation but a nation of nations."[1] All Americans except Native Americans are either descended from immigrants or are immigrants themselves. Today, federal law allows up to 800,000 new immigrants to be legally admitted to the

Responding to criticisms that many minority groups had been undercounted in the previous census, the Census Bureau launched special advertising campaigns to improve cooperation rates in these communities in 2000. Here you can see a poster in Detroit targeted at the large number of Iraqi immigrants in the city.

country every year. This is equivalent to adding a city with the population of Indianapolis every year. And in recent years, illegal immigrants have outnumbered legal immigrants.

There have been three great waves of immigration to the United States.

- Prior to the late nineteenth century, northwestern Europeans (English, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians) constituted the first wave of immigration.
- During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, southern and eastern Europeans (Italians, Jews, Poles, Russians, and others) made up much of the second wave. Most of these passed through Ellis Island in New York (now a popular museum) as their first stop in the new world.
- In recent decades, a third wave of immigrants has consisted of Hispanics (from Cuba, Central America, and Mexico) and Asians (from Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere). The 1980s saw the second largest number of immigrants of any decade in American history, and the 1990s finished not far behind.

Immigrants bring with them their aspirations, as well as their own political beliefs. For example, Cubans in Miami, who nearly constitute a majority of the city's population, first came to America to escape Fidel Castro's Marxist regime and have brought their anti-Communist sentiments with them. Similarly, the Vietnamese came to America after a Communist takeover there. Cubans and Vietnamese are just two recent examples of the many types of immigrants who have come to America over the years to flee an oppressive government. Other examples from previous periods of heavy immigration include the Irish in the first wave and the Russians in the second. Throughout American history, such groups have fostered a great appreciation for individualism in American public policy by their wish to be free of governmental control.

The American Melting Pot

With its long history of immigration, the United States has often been called a **melting pot**. This phrase refers to a mixture of cultures, ideas, and peoples. As the third wave of immigration continues, policymakers have begun to speak of a new **minority majority**, meaning that America will eventually cease to have a White, generally Anglo-Saxon majority. The 2000 census data found an all-time low in the percentage of non-Hispanic White Americans—just over 69 percent of the population. African Americans made up 12 percent of the population, Hispanics 13 percent, Asians 4 percent, and

melting pot

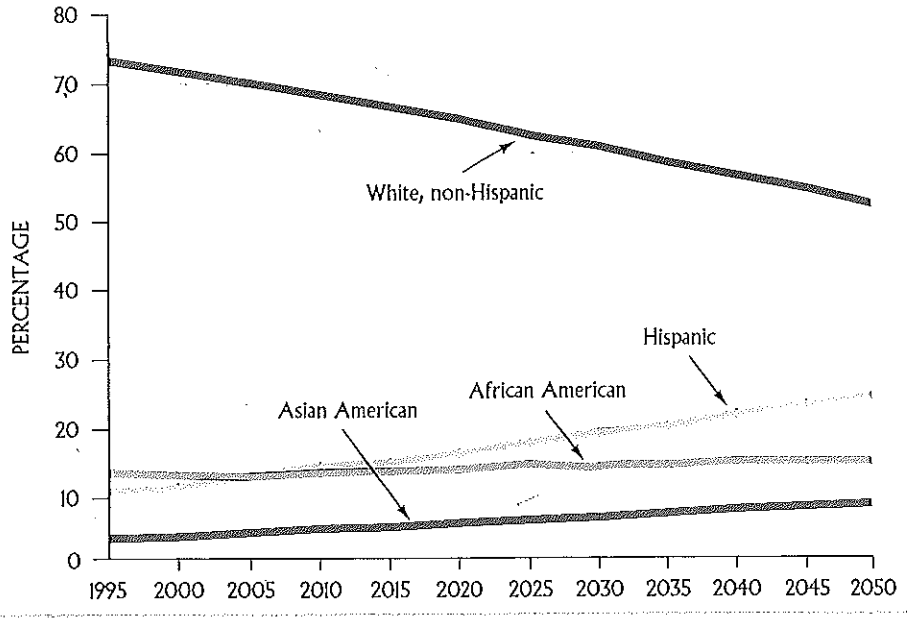
The mixing of cultures, ideas, and peoples that has changed the American nation. The United States, with its history of immigration, has often been called a melting pot.

minority majority

The emergence of a non-Caucasian majority, as compared with a White, generally Anglo-Saxon majority. It is predicted that by about 2060, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans together will outnumber White Americans.

Figure 6.1 The Coming Minority Majority

Based on the basis of current birth rates and immigration rates, the Census Bureau estimates that the demographics of the country should change as shown in the accompanying graph. Extend the lines a bit beyond the year 2050, and it is clear that the minority groups will soon be in the majority nationwide. Of course, should rates of birth and immigration change, so will these estimates. But already there are 65 congressional districts with a minority majority, about 85 percent of which are represented in the House by an African American, a Hispanic, or an Asian American.



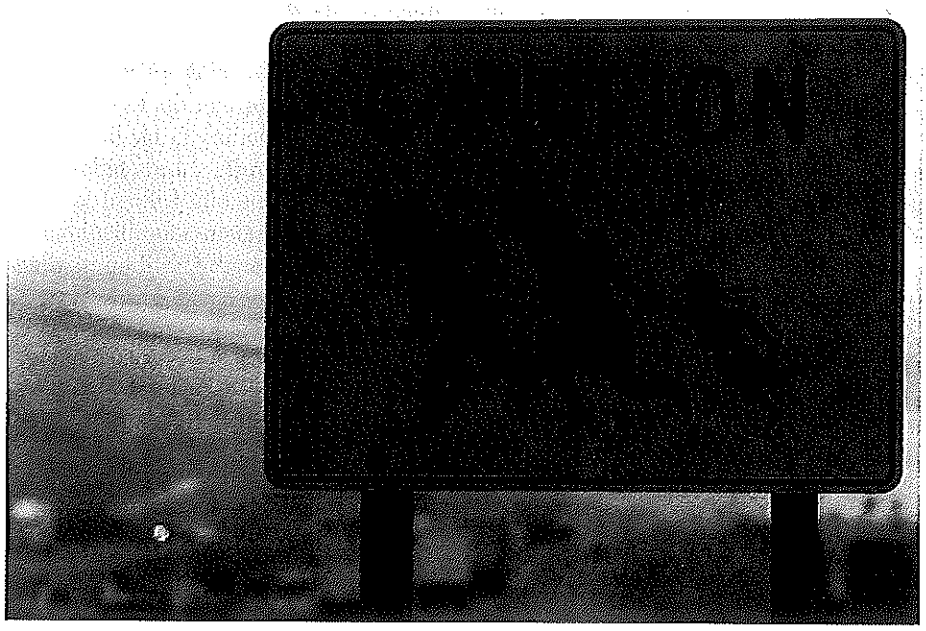
Native Americans slightly less than 1 percent. Between 1980 and 1990, minority populations grew at a much faster rate than the White population. As you can see in Figure 6.1, the Census Bureau estimates that by the middle of the twenty-first century, Whites will represent only 52 percent of the population.

Until recently, the largest minority group in the country has been the African-American population. One in eight Americans is a descendent of these reluctant immigrants: Africans who were brought to America by force as slaves. As discussed in Chapter 5, a legacy of racism and discrimination has left a higher proportion of the African-American population economically and politically disadvantaged than the White population. In 2002, the U.S. Census Bureau found that 24 percent of African Americans lived below the poverty line compared to 10 percent of Whites.

Despite this economic disadvantage, African Americans have recently been exercising a good deal of political power. The number of African-American elected officials has increased by over 500 percent since 1970.[2] African Americans have been elected as mayors of many of the country's biggest cities, including Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. In 2001, Colin Powell became the first African-American Secretary of State and Condoleezza Rice became the nation's first African-American to serve as the president's National Security Advisor.

The familiar problems of African Americans sometimes obscure the problems of other minority groups, such as Hispanics (composed largely of Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans). The 2000 Census reported that for the first time the Hispanic population outnumbered the African-American population. Like African Americans, Hispanics are concentrated in cities. Hispanics are rapidly gaining power in the Southwest, and cities such as San Antonio and Denver have elected mayors of Hispanic heritage. In 2002, the state legislatures of New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and Califofnia all had at least 9 percent Hispanic representation.[3]

An issue of particular concern to the Hispanic community is what to do about the problem of illegal immigration. The Simpson-Mazzoli Act, named after its congressional sponsors, requires that employers document the citizenship of their employees. Whether people are born in Canton, Ohio, or Canton, China, they must prove that they



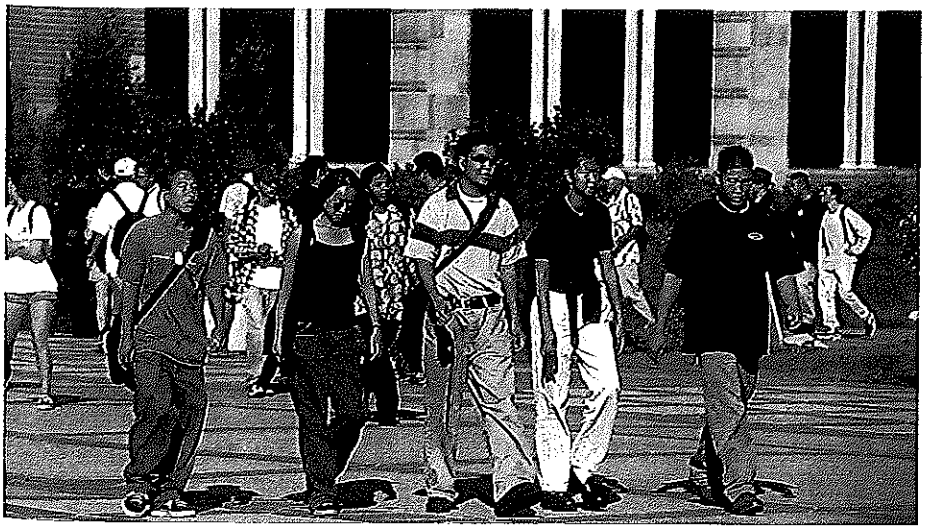
Just north of San Diego, the problem of illegal immigration from Mexico has taken a dangerous turn. Seeking to make their way around a freeway checkpoint, immigrants sometimes attempt to cross the busy San Diego freeway. After a number of people had been hit by cars, authorities posted signs like these to warn motorists to look out for people crossing the freeway.

are either U.S. citizens or legal immigrants in order to work. Civil and criminal penalties can be assessed against employers who knowingly employ undocumented immigrants. This law has raised concern among leaders of immigrant groups, who worry that employers may simply decline to hire members of such groups rather than take any chances. There has been little evidence of this so far, however. In fact, many believe the provisions of the Simpson-Mazzoli Act have proved to be inadequate in stopping illegal immigration from Mexico. One proposed solution that has been very controversial in recent years involves denying all benefits from government programs to people who cannot prove that they are legal residents of the United States (see "Do We Need to Get Tougher with Illegal Immigrants?").

Participation

The Debate Over Immigration

Unlike Hispanics who have come to America to escape poverty, the recent influx of Asians has been driven by a new class of professional workers looking for greater opportunity. Asians who have come to America since the 1965 Immigration Act[4] opened the gate to them make up the most highly skilled immigrant group in American history, as Ronald Takaki documents.[5] Indeed, Asian Americans have often been called



Asian Americans have been labeled as the "superachievers" of the coming minority majority due to their high levels of educational achievement and income. The proportion of Asian-American students currently exceeds 40 percent at some University of California campuses.

You Are the Policymaker

Do We Need to Get Tougher with Illegal Immigrants?

Americans have traditionally welcomed immigrants with open arms. However, some immigrants have recently become less welcome: those who are in the country illegally. In states such as Texas and California, where many illegal immigrants from south of the border reside, there is concern that providing public services to these people is seriously draining state resources. This became the topic of heated debate when Californians voted on Proposition 187 in 1994. Labeled by its proponents as the "save our state initiative," this measure sought to cut illegal immigrants off from public services, such as the right of their children to attend public schools, and medical assistance for people with low incomes. According to its advocates, not only would Proposition 187 save the state treasury, but it would also cut down on the number of illegal immigrants—many of whom, they argued, had come mostly to take advantage of the free goods offered in America.

Opponents replied that although illegal immigration is surely a problem, the idea of cutting off public services could easily do more harm than good. They pointed out the risks to public health of denying illegal immigrants basic health care, such as immunizations that help control communicable diseases. And by throwing the children of illegal immigrants out of school, they argued that many would inevitably turn to crime with nothing to do all day. Besides, though they may be here illegally, these immigrants have to pay sales taxes on everything they buy and pay rent—a portion of which indirectly goes to the state when their landlords pay their property taxes. Given that they contribute to the tax base that pays for public services, opponents of Proposition 187 argued that they should in all fairness be entitled to make use of them.

The proponents of Proposition 187 won at the ballot box. However, so far they have lost in their attempts to get the measure enforced. The courts have consistently ruled that the proposition violated the rights of illegal immigrants as well as national laws concerning eligibility for federally funded benefits. Overall, the proposition was held to be an unconstitutional state scheme to regulate immigration.

Because illegal immigrants continue to stream into the United States, this issue remains a hot one. In 2004, the Republican Party platform advocated "strong workplace enforcement with tough penalties against employees and employers who violate immigration laws." In contrast, the Democratic Party platform proposed that "Undocumented immigrants within our borders who clear a background check, work hard and pay taxes should have a path to earn full participation in America." The Republican platform called such a proposal "amnesty" and argued that this would "have the effect of encouraging illegal immigration and would give an unfair advantage to those who have broken our laws."

What do you think? Do you think a tough approach is the way to go, or do you favor incorporating illegal immigrants who prove themselves worthy into American society? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?

the superachievers of the minority majority. This is especially true in the case of educational attainment—49 percent of Asian Americans over the age of 25 hold a college degree, almost twice the national average. As a result, their median family income has already surpassed that of non-Hispanic Whites. Although still a very small minority group, Asian Americans have had some notable political successes. In 1996, Gary Locke (a Chinese American) was elected governor of Washington and in 2001 Norman Mineta (a Japanese American) was appointed to be Secretary of Transportation.

Whereas Asian Americans are the best off of America's minority groups, by far the worst off is the one indigenous minority, known today as Native Americans. Before Europeans arrived in America, 12 to 15 million Native Americans lived here. War and disease reduced their numbers to a mere 210,000 by 1910. About 4 million Americans currently list themselves as being of Native American heritage. Statistics show that they are the least healthy, the poorest, and the least educated group in the American melting pot. Only a handful of Native Americans have found wealth; even fewer have found power. Some tribes have discovered oil or other minerals on their land and have used these resources successfully. Other tribes have opened profitable casinos on their native lands. Many Native Americans, though, remain economically and politically disadvantaged in American society. In the Dakotas, site of the largest Sioux reser-

vations, census data show that roughly half the Native Americans live below the poverty line.

Americans live in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual society. Yet, regardless of ethnic background most Americans share a common **political culture**—an overall set of values widely shared within a society. For example, there is much agreement among ethnic groups about many basic American values, such as the principle of treating all equally. Yet, not all observers view this most recent wave of immigration without concern. Ellis Cose has written that "racial animosity has proven to be both an enduring American phenomenon and an invaluable political tool." Because America has entered a period of rapid ethnic change, Cose predicts immigration "will be a magnet for conflict and hostility."[6]

political culture

An overall set of values widely shared within a society.

The emergence of the minority majority is just one of several major demographic changes that have altered the face of American politics. In addition, the population has been moving and aging.

Visual Literacy

Understanding Who We Are

The Regional Shift

For most of American history, the most populous states were concentrated in the states north of the Mason-Dixon line and east of the Mississippi River. As you can see in Figure 6.2, though, over the last 60 years, much of America's population growth has been centered in the West and South. In particular, the populations of Florida, California, and Texas have grown rapidly as people moved to the Sunbelt. From 1990 to 2000, the rate of population growth was 24 percent in Florida, 14 percent in California, and 23 percent in Texas. In contrast, population growth in the Northeast was a scant 5 percent.

Demographic changes are associated with political changes. States gain or lose congressional representation as their population changes, and thus power shifts as well. This **reapportionment** process occurs once a decade, after every census. After each census, the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are reallocated to the states on the basis of population changes. Thus, as California has grown throughout this century, its representation in the House has increased from just 7 in 1900 to 53 as of 2002. New York, on the other hand, has lost about one-third of its delegation over the last 50 years.

reapportionment

The process of reallocating seats in the House of Representatives every ten years on the basis of the results of the census.

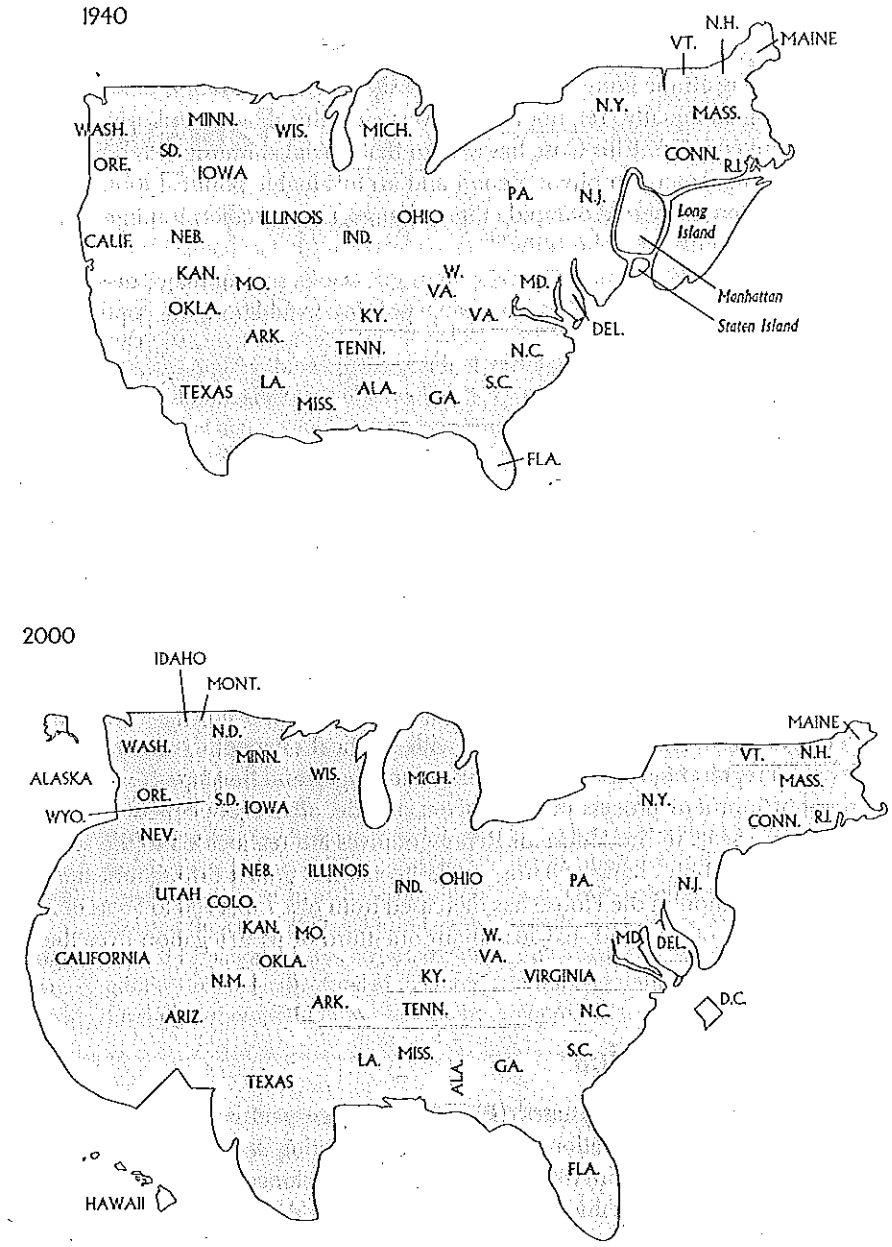
The Graying of America

Florida, one of the three megastates, has grown in large part as a result of its attractiveness to senior citizens. Nationwide, the fastest growing age group in America is composed of citizens over 65. Not only are people living longer as a result of medical advances, but the birthrate has dropped substantially. About 60 percent of adult Americans living today grew up in families of four or more children. If the current trend continues, this figure will eventually be cut to 30 percent.[7]

Social Security is structured as a pay-as-you-go system. That means today's workers pay the benefits for today's retirees. In 1940, there were 42 workers per retiree; today there are three. By 2040 there will be only two, which will put tremendous pressure on the Social Security system. Begun under the New Deal, Social Security is exceeded only by national defense as America's most costly public policy. The current group of older Americans and those soon to follow can lay claim to trillions of dollars guaranteed by Social Security. People who have been promised benefits naturally expect to collect them, especially benefits for which they have made monthly contributions. Thus both political parties have long treated Social Security benefits as sacrosanct. Although some politicians have warned about the projected shortfalls in the Social Security system neither major party has yet proposed a plan for how to deal with this looming problem.

Figure 6.2 Shifting Population

These maps paint a population portrait of the United States over the last six decades. The states are drawn to scale on the basis of population. In 1940, the most populous states were concentrated east of the Mississippi River. New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois stand out. By 2000 the national population picture—and the map—had changed considerably. Today the country's 295 million citizens are scattered more widely, and though large concentrations of population still dominate the East, there has been huge growth on the West Coast, in Texas, and in Florida.



Source: The 1940 map was the work of the National Opinion Research Center, University of Denver, as printed in John Gunther's 1946 book *Inside U.S.A.*

political socialization

According to Richard Dawson, "the process through which an individual acquires his [or her] particular political orientations—his [or her] knowledge, feelings, and evaluations regarding his [or her] political world."

How Americans Learn About Politics: Political Socialization

As the most experienced segment of the population, the elderly have undergone the most political socialization. Political socialization is "the process through which an individual acquires his or her particular political orientations—his or her knowledge, feelings, and evaluations regarding his or her political world."[8] As people

become more socialized with age, their political orientations grow firmer. It should not be surprising that governments aim their socialization efforts largely at the young, not the elderly. Authoritarian regimes are particularly concerned with indoctrinating their citizens at an early age. For example, youth groups in the former Soviet Union were organized into the Komsomols, the Young Communist League. Membership in these groups was helpful in gaining admission to college and entering certain occupations. In the Komsomols, Soviet youth were taught their government's view of the advantages of communism (though apparently not well enough to keep the system going). In contrast, socialization is a much more subtle process in the United States.

The Process of Political Socialization

Only a small portion of Americans' political learning is formal. Civics or government classes in high school teach citizens some of the nuts and bolts of government—how many senators each state has, what presidents do, and so on. But such formal socialization is only the tip of the iceberg. Americans do most of their political learning without teachers or classes.

Informal learning is really much more important than formal, in-class learning about politics. Most informal socialization is almost accidental. Few parents sit down with their children and say, "Johnny, let us tell you why we're Republicans." Words like *pick up*, *absorb*, and *acquire* perhaps best describe the informal side of socialization. The family, the media, and the schools all serve as important agents of socialization.

The Family. The family's role in socialization is central because of its monopoly on two crucial resources in the early years: time and emotional commitment. The powerful influence of the family is not easily undermined. Most students in an American government class like to think of themselves as independent thinkers, especially when it comes to politics. Yet one can predict how the majority of young people will vote simply by knowing the political leanings of their parents. Table 6.1 shows how well people's party identification corresponds with that of their parents.

As children approach adult status, though, some degree of adolescent rebellion against parents and their beliefs often takes place. Witnessing the outpouring of youthful rebellion in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many people thought a generation gap was opening up. Radical youth supposedly condemned their backward-thinking parents. Though such a gap did exist in a few families, the overall evidence for it was slim. Eight years after Jennings and Niemi first interviewed a sample of high school seniors and their parents in the mid-1960s, they still found far more agreement than

Table 6.1 How Party Identification Is Passed Down from One Generation to the Next

The National Election Study has sometimes asked respondents whether their parents thought of themselves as Democrats, Independents, or Republicans when they were growing up. In the most recent available data, 87 percent of those who could identify the partisanship of both parents reported that their parents agreed on partisan choice. Here you can see how these respondents have generally followed in their parents' footsteps politically.

	DEMOCRAT	INDEPENDENT	REPUBLICAN	TOTAL
Both parents Democrats	59	29	13	100%
Both parents Independents	17	67	16	100%
Both parents Republicans	12	29	59	100%

Source: Authors' analysis of 1992 National Election Study data.

disagreement across the generational divide. Moving out of the family nest and into adulthood, the offspring did become somewhat less like their parents politically, however.[9] Other socialization agents had apparently exerted influence in the intervening years.

The Mass Media. The mass media are "the new parent" according to many observers. Average grade-school youngsters spend more time each week watching television than they spend at school. And television now displaces parents as the chief source of information as children get older.

Unfortunately, today's generation of young adults is significantly less likely to watch television news and read newspapers than their elders. Many studies have attributed the relative lack of political knowledge of today's youth to their media consumption, or more appropriately, to their lack of it.[10] In 1965, Gallup found virtually no difference between age categories in frequency of following politics through the media. In recent years, however, a considerable age gap has opened up, with older people paying the most attention to the news and young adults the least. In fact, the typical viewer of the major national newscasts is now an astonishing 58 years old.[11] If you have ever turned on the TV news and wondered why so many of the commercials seem to be for various prescription drugs, now you know why.

School. Political socialization is as important to a government as it is to an individual. This is one reason why governments (including America's) often use schools to promote national loyalty and support for its basic values. In most American schools, the day begins with the Pledge of Allegiance. During the 1988 presidential campaign, George Bush argued that teachers should be required to lead students in the Pledge. His opponent, Michael Dukakis, had vetoed a bill to require this in Massachusetts, claiming that it was unconstitutional. Underlying Bush's argument was the assumption that proper socialization in the schools was crucial to the American political system—a position Dukakis disagreed with more in terms of means than in ends.

Governments throughout the world use schools to attempt to raise children committed to the basic values of the system. For years, American children have been successfully educated about the virtues of capitalism and democracy. In the hands of an unscrupulous government, though, educational socialization can sometimes be a dangerous tool. For example, in Nazi Germany, textbooks were used to justify murderous policies. Consider the following example from a Nazi-era math book:

> *If a mental patient costs 4 Reichsmarks a day in maintenance, a cripple 5.50, and a criminal 3.50, and about 50,000 of these people are in our institutions, how much does it cost our state at a daily rate of 4 Reichsmarks—and how many marriage loans of 1,000 Reichsmarks per couple could have been given out instead?*[12]

One can only imagine how students' constant exposure, to this kind of thinking warped the minds of some young people growing up in Nazi Germany.

Both authoritarian and democratic governments care that students learn the positive features of their political system because it helps ensure that youth will grow up to be supportive citizens. David Easton and Jack Dennis have argued that "those children who begin to develop positive feelings toward the political authorities will grow into adults who will be less easily disenchanted with the system than those children who early acquire negative, hostile sentiments."[13] Of course, this is not always the case. Well-socialized youths of the 1960s led the opposition to the American regime and the war in Vietnam. It could be argued, however, that even these protestors had been positively shaped by the socialization process, for the goal of most activists was to make the system more democratically responsive rather than to change American government radically.

These children—the faces of the coming minority majority population—suggest the unique problem of American political socialization: transforming people of diverse cultural backgrounds and beliefs into participating American citizens.

Today, education is often the issue that people cite as the most important to them, and there is no doubt that educational policy matters a great deal. Most American schools are public schools, financed by the government. Their textbooks are often chosen by the local and state boards, and teachers are certified by the state government. Schooling is perhaps the most obvious intrusion of the government into Americans' socialization. Education exerts a profound influence on a variety of political attitudes and behavior. Better-educated citizens are more likely to vote in elections, they exhibit more knowledge about politics and public policy, and they are more tolerant of opposing (even radical) opinions.

The payoffs of schooling extend beyond better jobs and better pay. Educated citizens also more closely approximate the model of a democratic citizen. A formal civics course may not make much difference, but the whole context of education does. As Albert Einstein once said, "Schools need not preach political doctrine to defend democracy. If they shape men and women capable of critical thought and trained in social attitudes, that is all that is necessary."

Political Learning over a Lifetime

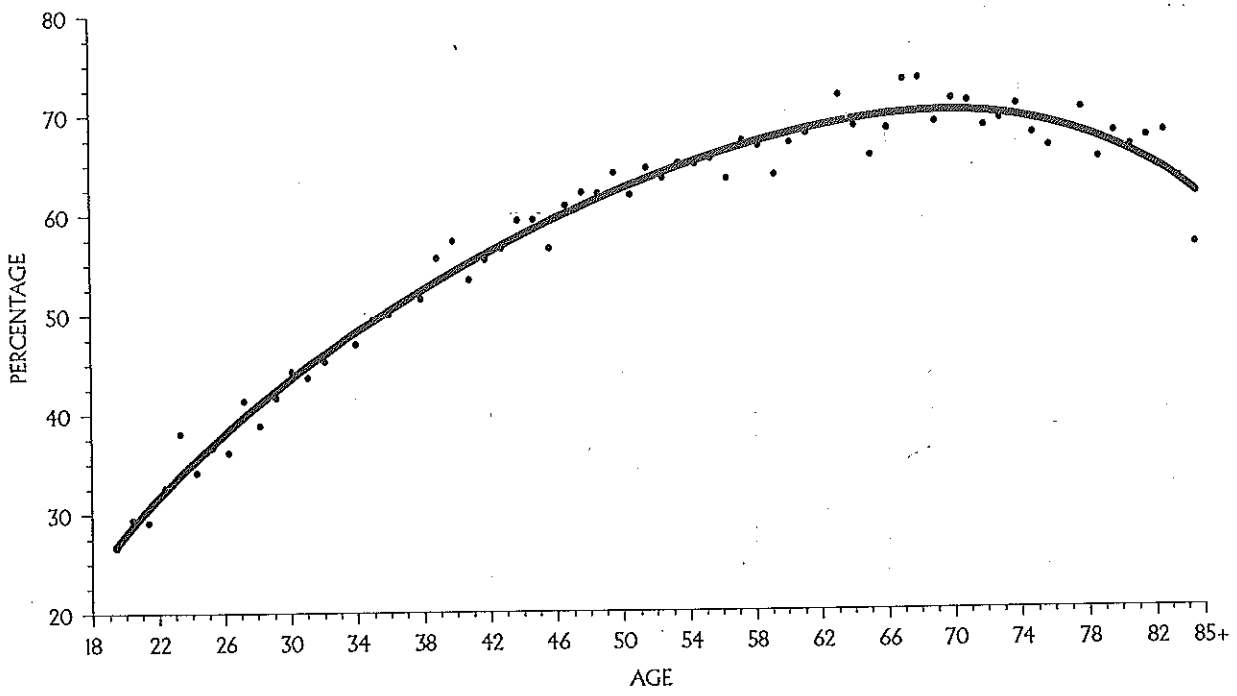
Political learning does not, of course, end when one reaches 18, or even when one graduates from college. Politics is a lifelong activity. Because America is an aging society, it is important to consider the effects of growing older on political learning and behavior.

Aging increases political participation, as well as strength of party attachment. Young adults (those 18 through 25) lack experience with politics. Because political behavior is to some degree learned behavior, there is some learning yet to do. Political participation rises steadily with age until the infirmities of old age make it harder to participate, as can be seen in the data presented in Figure 6.3. Similarly, strength of party identification also increases as one grows older and often develops a pattern for usually voting for one party or another.

Politics, like most other things, is thus a learned behavior. Americans learn to vote, to pick a political party, and to evaluate political events in the world around them. One of the products of all this learning is what is known as public opinion.

Figure 6.3 Turnout by Age, 2000

This graph shows how turnout in the 2000 presidential election was related to age.



Source: Authors' analysis of 2000 Census Bureau data.

Measuring Public Opinion and Political Information

Before examining the role that public opinion plays in American politics, it is essential to learn about the science of public opinion measurement. How do we really know the approximate answers to questions such as what percentage of young people favor abortion rights, how many Hispanics supported George W. Bush's 2004 campaign, or what percentage of the public favored immediate air strikes against Afghanistan after September 11? Polls provide these answers, but there is much skepticism about polls. Many people wonder how accurately this can be done by only interviewing 1,000 or 1,500 people around the country. This section provides an explanation of how polling works, which will hopefully enable you to become a well-informed consumer of polls.

How Polls Are Conducted

Public opinion polling is a relatively new science. It was first developed by a young man named George Gallup, who initially did some polling for his mother-in-law, a longshot candidate for secretary of state in Iowa in 1932. With the Democratic landslide of that year, she won a stunning victory, thereby further stimulating Gallup's interest in politics. From that little acorn the mighty oak of public opinion polling has grown. The firm that Gallup founded spread throughout the democratic world, and in some languages, *Gallup* is actually the word used for an opinion poll.[14]

sample

A relatively small proportion of people who are chosen in a survey so as to be representative of the whole.

It would be prohibitively expensive and time consuming to ask every citizen his or her opinion on a whole range of issues. Instead, polls rely on a sample of the population—a relatively small proportion of people who are chosen to represent the

whole. Herbert Asher draws an analogy to a blood test to illustrate the principle of sampling.[15] Your doctor does not need to drain a gallon of blood from you to determine whether you have mononucleosis, AIDS, or any other disease. Rather, a small sample of blood will reveal its properties.

In public opinion polling, a sample of about 1,000 to 1,500 people can accurately represent the "universe" of potential voters. The key to the accuracy of opinion polls is the technique of **random sampling**, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected as part of the sample. Your chance of being asked to be in the poll should therefore be as good as that of anyone else—rich or poor, African American or White, young or old, male or female. If the sample is randomly drawn, about 12 percent of those interviewed will be African American, slightly over 50 percent female, and so forth, matching the population as a whole.

random sampling

The key technique employed by sophisticated survey researchers, which operates on the principle that everyone should have an equal probability of being selected for the sample.

Remember that the science of polling involves estimation; a sample can represent the population with only a certain degree of confidence. The level of confidence is known as the **sampling error**, which depends on the size of the sample. The more people interviewed in a poll, the more confident one can be of the results. A typical poll of about 1,500 to 2,000 respondents has a sampling error of ±3 percent. What this means is that 95 percent of the time the poll results are within 3 percent of what the entire population thinks. If 60 percent of the sample say they approve of the job the president is doing, one can be pretty certain that the true figure is between 57 and 63 percent.

sampling error

The level of confidence in the findings of a public opinion poll. The more people interviewed, the more confident one can be of the results.

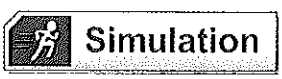
In order to obtain results that will usually be within sampling error, researchers must follow proper sampling techniques. In perhaps the most infamous survey ever, a 1936 *Literary Digest* poll underestimated the vote for President Franklin Roosevelt by 19 percent, erroneously predicting a big victory for Republican Alf Landon. The well-established magazine suddenly became a laughingstock and soon went out of business. Although the number of responses the magazine obtained for its poll was a staggering 2,376,000, its polling methods were badly flawed. Trying to reach as many people as possible, the magazine drew names from the biggest lists they could find: telephone books and motor vehicle records. In the midst of the Great Depression, the people on these lists were above the average income level (only 40 percent of the public had telephones then; fewer still owned cars) and were more likely to vote Republican. The moral of the story is this: Accurate representation, not the number of responses, is the most important feature of a public opinion survey. Indeed, as polling techniques have advanced over the last 60 years, typical sample sizes have been getting smaller, not larger.

The newest computer and telephone technology has made surveying less expensive and more commonplace. In the early days of polling, pollsters needed a national network of interviewers to traipse door-to-door in their localities with a clipboard of questions. Now most polling is done on the telephone with samples selected through **random-digit dialing**. Calls are placed to phone numbers within randomly chosen exchanges (for example, 512–471-xxxx) around the country. In this manner, both listed and unlisted numbers are reached at a cost of about one-fifth that of person-to-person interviewing. There are a couple of disadvantages, however. About 7 percent of the population does not have a phone, and people are somewhat less willing to participate over the telephone than in person—it is easier to hang up than to slam the door in someone's face. These are small trade-offs for political candidates running for minor offices, for whom telephone polls are the only affordable method of gauging public opinion. However, in this era of cell phones, many pollsters are starting to worry whether this methodology will continue to work much longer. For an incisive discussion of this issue, see "Issues of the Times: Does Conducting Surveys by Telephone Still Make Sense?" on pages 190–191.

random-digit dialing

A technique used by pollsters to place telephone calls randomly to both listed and unlisted numbers when conducting a survey.

From its modest beginning with George Gallup's 1932 polls for his mother-in-law in Iowa, polling has become a big business. Public opinion polling is one of those American innovations, like soft drinks and fast food restaurants, that has spread throughout the world. From Manhattan to Moscow, from Tulsa to Tokyo, people want to know what other people think.



You Are a Polling Consultant

Issues of the Times

The New York Times nytimes.com

The Issue: Does Conducting Surveys by Telephone Still Make Sense?

Polls are important in American democracy because they tell us what Americans think about the issues facing the country. The media regularly reports on poll findings as if they were definitive readings on public opinion. Politicians can, and often do, react to poll findings between elections in order to be responsive to public desires. Both the media and the politicians are quite aware of the margin of error inherent in any poll, as discussed in this chapter.

But what if inaccuracies in polling arise from other sources that cannot easily be measured? The calculations for the margin of error are dependent on the assumption that people who do not respond to the poll are no different from those who do respond. In the days when most people were fairly easy to reach and were agreeable to being interviewed, this was a fairly reasonable assumption most of the time. However, as the following article notes, this state of affairs has changed due to the proliferation of cell phones and caller ID. The impact on the polling industry, and our ability to accurately measure what the American public thinks, may well be far-reaching.

Read All About It

Cellphones and Caller ID Are Making Pollsters' Jobs Harder

By Adam Nagourney
November 5, 2002

A rapid rise in the use of cellphones and caller identification technology, along with telemarketing calls that are chasing Americans from their telephones, is making political polling more difficult and increasingly less reliable, pollsters say. A result this Election Day is that it is harder than ever for pollsters to find voters and to get them to say how they intend to vote.

Pollsters say a problem that they first began noting 10 years ago, as Americans realized that answering machines could be used to screen out unwanted solicitations, is today forcing a re-examination of the methods by which they question voters.

In interviews, several pollsters said they now discussed ways to change how they approached a fundamental procedure in politics that has, over 75 years, moved from the mail to door-to-door canvassing to the telephone.

"At some point, there's going to be a crash between what's happening in the country and what's picked up on the phone," Stanley Greenberg, President Bill Clinton's pollster in the White House, said yesterday.

Whit Ayres, a veteran Republican pollster, said: "I can't fathom 20 years from now the telephone remaining the primary means of data collection. This industry is in a transition from telephone data collection to Internet data collection."

"In the meantime," Mr. Ayres said, with a note of frustration in his voice, "we've got to get people to answer the phone."

Please see Cellphones Page 191

Cellphones

Continued from Page 190

Pollsters said the increasing difficulty in reaching people was undercutting their efforts to assemble a pool of voters that was scientifically large enough and diverse enough upon which to draw reliable conclusions. While some pollsters said they could compensate for that by staying in the field longer or calling more people, that kind of effort takes time and costs money, two things that are often in short supply at the end of a campaign.

Pollsters said they had tried to respond to the problem with various time-consuming and costly remedies. They have increased the time they spend in the field, employed teams of specialists to methodically call back numbers that are answered by machines, and mathematically adjusted their findings at the end of the survey period to make up for voters they might have missed.

But several described these as stop-gap measures that have been only partly successful. Pollsters are under intense pressure to move quickly and hold down costs. They are uncomfortable with the kind of statistical adjustments used to compensate for missed or refused calls.

In particular, pollsters said they might be undercounting the growing number of younger voters who only have cellphones, as well as elderly voters who, they said, tend to be especially wary of any call that sounds like a solicitation. Several pollsters said the rise in the number of unlisted telephone numbers was more pronounced in minority and low-income neighborhoods.

"There is a lot of evidence that all of this is making our life more difficult and hurting our efforts," Mark A. Schulman, the president of the American Association of Public Opinion Research, said yesterday.

But, Mr. Schulman added, "I'm not ready to run up the white flag and concede defeat."

Matthew Dowd, a Republican pollster who advises the White House, said: "Right now, I'd still make the argument that polling is the best way to find things out. You haven't gotten to a point where you can't trust it, but you have gotten to a point you have to weigh it."

In particular, pollsters said they might be undercounting the growing number of younger voters who only have cellphones, as well as elderly voters who, they said, tend to be especially wary of any call that sounds like a solicitation.

One prominent pollster said the number of telephone calls that were not completed—either because no one answers the telephone or because they answer and refuse to participate—had jumped in recent years, to about 30 percent from 10 percent. The number is even higher in New York and in South Florida.

"Response rates are falling," said Tom W. Smith of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. "Either you spend a lot more time and money doing your survey or you end up being stuck with a much lower response rate than is traditionally acceptable."

Mr. Smith said that to complicate things for people in his profession, new screening machinery had been developed that can, in theory, identify calls that are being made by a mass dialer or can refuse calls from any unknown number.

Cellphones have posed another complication for pollsters. There is no directory of cellphone numbers, and an increasing number of people use cellphones as their home telephones. Mr. Schulman said federal regulations barred pollsters from calling people on their cellphones without permission, because the recipients of the calls are obliged to pay the cost.

Several pollsters said yesterday that they would prefer, if possible, not to conduct interviews with people on cellphones. These interviews typically take 20 minutes or so, and were intended to be done with people sitting at home rather than chatting on a cellphone from a car or restaurant.

"We haven't come to grips with the cellphone issue yet, I'll be honest with you about that," Mr. Schulman said. "Up to this point, the cellphone has generally been the second phone for the hard-wire phone in the household. In the future, we've got to figure out a strategy to deal with this."

Think About It

- In your experience, who do you think are the types of Americans who are now hardest to reach due to the development of cell phones and caller ID?
- Do you think young people like you are likely becoming harder to interview for surveys as a result of these technologies?
- One of the pollsters interviewed in this article claims that polling will eventually be done via the Internet instead of the phone. What do you see as the possible advantages and disadvantages of such a change?
- Does this article make you more skeptical about polls you read about in the newspaper?

Public opinion polls these days are mostly done over the telephone. Interviewers, most of whom are young people (and frequently college students), sit in front of computer terminals and read the questions that appear on the screen to randomly chosen individuals they have reached on the phone. They then enter the appropriate coded responses directly into the computer database. Such efficient procedures make it possible for analysts to get survey results very quickly.

The Role of Polls in American Democracy

Polls help political candidates detect public preferences. Supporters of polling insist that it is a tool for democracy. With it, they say, policymakers can keep in touch with changing opinions on the issues. No longer do politicians have to wait until the next election to see whether the public approves or disapproves of the government's course. If the poll results suddenly turn, then government officials can make corresponding midcourse corrections. Indeed, it was George Gallup's fondest hope that polling could contribute to the democratic process by providing a way for public desires to be heard at times other than elections.

Critics of polling, by contrast, say it makes politicians more concerned with following than leading. Polls might have told the constitutional convention delegates that the Constitution was unpopular or might have told President Thomas Jefferson that people did not want the Louisiana Purchase. Certainly they would have told William Seward not to buy Alaska, a transaction known widely at the time as "Seward's Folly." Polls may thus discourage bold leadership, like that of Winston Churchill, who once said,

> *Nothing is more dangerous than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup poll, always taking one's pulse and taking one's temperature. . . . There is only one duty, only one safe course, and that is to try to be right and not to fear to do or say what you believe.*[16]

Recent research by Jacobs and Shapiro argues that the common perception of politicians pandering to the results of public opinion polls may be mistaken. Their examination of major policy debates in the 1990s finds that political leaders "track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters favor."[17] Staff members in both the White House and the Congress repeatedly remarked that their purpose in conducting polls was not to set policies, but rather to find the keywords and phrases with which to "sell" policies. Thus, rather than using polls to identify centrist approaches that will have the broadest popular appeal, Jacobs and Shapiro argue that elites use them to formulate strategies that enable them to avoid compromising on what they want to do.

Polls can also weaken democracy by distorting the election process. They are often accused of creating a *bandwagon effect*. The wagon carrying the band was the centerpiece of nineteenth-century political parades, and enthusiastic supporters would liter-

ally jump on it. Today, the term refers to voters who support a candidate merely because they see that others are doing so. Although only 2 percent of people in a recent CBS/*New York Times* poll said that poll results had influenced them, 26 percent said they thought others had been influenced (showing that Americans feel "It's the other person who's susceptible"). Beyond this, polls play to the media's interest in who's ahead in the race. The issues of recent presidential campaigns have sometimes been drowned out by a steady flood of poll results.

exit poll

Public opinion surveys used by major media pollsters to predict electoral winners with speed and precision.

Probably the most widely criticized type of poll is the Election Day exit poll. For this type of poll, voting places are randomly selected around the country. Workers are then sent to these places and told to ask every tenth person how they voted. The results are accumulated toward the end of the day, enabling the television networks to project the outcomes of all but very close races before the polls even close. In the presidential elections of 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1996, the networks declared a national winner while millions on the West Coast still had hours to vote. Critics have charged that this practice discourages many people from voting and thereby affects the outcome of some state and local races.

In 2000, the exit polls received much of the blame for the media's inaccurate calls of the Florida result on election night. But contrary to common perception, the exit polls deserve only a portion of the blame for the networks' fiasco. Because the Florida exit poll showed a small advantage for Gore, the networks could not have called the election based on this information alone. Inaccurate reports and estimates of actual votes threw off the network prognostications most. The early call for Gore was apparently largely caused by underestimating the size of the absentee vote, which favored Bush. Then, near the end of the counting on election night, they estimated that there were only about 180,000 votes left to count when there were actually twice as many. Hence, they prematurely gave the state (and the presidency) to Bush, not realizing how much of a chance there was for Gore to close the gap. The chances of such a comedy of errors recurring is relatively small. Furthermore, the networks have made a number of changes in their procedures for predicting winners that resulted in slower but more reliable predictions in 2004.

Timeline

War, Peace, and Public Opinion

Perhaps the most pervasive criticism of polling is that by altering the wording of a question, pollsters can usually get the results they want. Sometimes subtle changes in question wording can produce dramatic differences. For example, a month before the start of the 1991 Gulf War, the percentage of the public who thought we should go to war was 18 percentage points higher in the ABC/*Washington Post* poll than in the CBS/*New York Times* poll. The former poll asked whether the United States should go to war "at some point after January 15 or not," a relatively vague question; in contrast, the latter poll offered an alternative to war, asking whether the "U.S. should start military actions against Iraq, or should the U.S. wait longer to see if the trade embargo and other economic sanctions work."[18] It is therefore important to evaluate carefully how questions are posed when reading public opinion data.

Polling sounds scientific with its talk of random samples and sampling error; it is easy to take results for solid fact. But being an informed consumer of polls requires more than just a nuts-and-bolts knowledge of how they are conducted. You should think about whether the questions are fair and unbiased before making too much of the results. The good—or the harm—that polls do depends on how well the data are collected and how thoughtfully the data are interpreted.

What Polls Reveal About Americans' Political Information

Abraham Lincoln spoke stirringly of the inherent wisdom of the American people: "It is true that you may fool all of the people some of the time; and you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time." Obviously, Lincoln recognized the complexity of public opinion.

Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton had very different views about the wisdom of common people. Jefferson trusted people's good sense and believed that education would enable them to take the tasks of citizenship ever more seriously. Toward that end, he founded the University of Virginia. Hamilton held a contrasting view. His infamous words "Your people, sir, are a great beast" do not reflect confidence in people's capacity for self-government.

If there had been polling data in the early days of the American republic, Hamilton would probably have delighted in throwing some of the results in Jefferson's face. If public opinion analysts agree about anything, it is that the level of public knowledge about politics is dismally low. As discussed in Chapter 1, this is particularly true for young people, but the overall levels of political knowledge are not particularly encouraging either. For example, in the 2004 National Annenberg Election Study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, a national sample of Democrats were asked a set of questions about the Democratic contenders during the ten days prior to the New Hampshire primary. The results were as follows:

- 59 percent knew which candidate had been a general (Clark)
- 42 percent knew which candidate had been a decorated Vietnam veteran (Kerry)
- 33 percent knew which candidate would repeal all the Bush tax cuts (Dean)
- 25 percent knew which candidate had been a trial lawyer (Edwards)

If so many voters did not know these very basic facts about the candidates, then there is little doubt that most were also unaware of the detailed policy platforms they were running on.

No amount of Jeffersonian faith in the wisdom of the common people can erase the fact that Americans are not well informed about politics. Polls have regularly found that less than half the public can name their representative in the House, much less say how he or she generally votes. Asking most people to explain their opinion on whether trade policy toward China should be liberalized, the proposed "Star Wars" missile defense system, or whether the strategic oil reserve should be tapped when gasoline prices skyrocket often elicits blank looks. When trouble flares in a far-off country, polls regularly find that people have no idea where that country is. In fact, surveys show that citizens around the globe lack a basic awareness of the world around them (see "America in Perspective: Citizens Show Little Knowledge of Geography.")

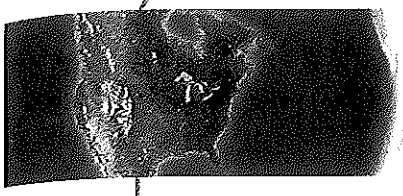
As Lance Bennett points out, these findings provide "a source of almost bitter humor in light of what the polls tell us about public information on other subjects."[19] He notes that more people know their astrological sign (76 percent) than know the name of their representative in the House. Slogans from TV commercials are better recognized than famous political figures. When people were asked which vegetable President George Bush did not like in the late 1980s, a poll found that 75 percent could identify this as broccoli, but relatively few people knew his stand on a tax cut for capital gains.

How can Americans, who live in the most information-rich society in the world, be so ill-informed about politics? Some blame the schools. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. criticizes schools for a failure to teach "cultural literacy."[20] People, he says, often lack the basic contextual knowledge—for example, where Afghanistan is, what the Vietnam War was about, and so forth—necessary to understand and use the information they receive from the news media or from listening to political candidates. Indeed, it has been found that increased levels of education over the last four decades have scarcely raised public knowledge about politics.[21] Despite the apparent glut of information provided by the media, Americans do not remember much about what they are exposed to through the media. (Of course, there are many critics who say that the media fail to provide much meaningful information, a topic that will be discussed in Chapter 7.)

Why It Matters

Political Knowledge of the Electorate

The average American clearly has less political information than most analysts consider to be desirable. While this level of information is surely adequate to maintain our democracy, survey data plainly show that citizens with above average levels of political knowledge are more likely to vote and to have stable and consistent opinions on policy issues. If political knowledge were to increase overall, it would in all likelihood be good for American democracy.

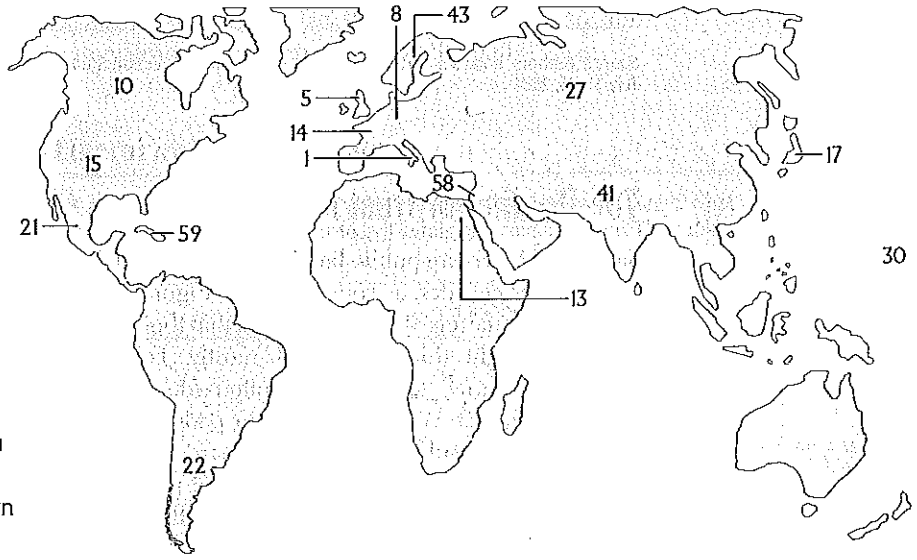


America in Perspective

Citizens Show Little Knowledge of Geography

In 2002, a major cross-national study sponsored by National Geographic interviewed representative samples of 18- to 24-year-olds to assess their knowledge of world geography. The results were discouraging, particularly with regard to American youth, who came in last in terms of placing countries accurately on the map, as shown in the test shown here. The average young person in the United States got less than half the questions right. Believe it or not, 11 percent of young Americans could not even find their own country on the map. Despite the American military campaign in Afghanistan after September 11, only 17 percent could correctly place this country on the map. Such lack of basic geographic knowledge is fairly common throughout the world. Here is the average score for each of the 10 countries in which the test was administered:

COUNTRY	AVERAGE % CORRECT
Sweden	79
Germany	77
Italy	75
France	71
Japan	62
Canada	56
United Kingdom	54
Mexico	49
United States	46



ANSWERS:
USA [15],
Russia [27],
Japan [17],
Mexico [21],
United Kingdom [5],
Sweden [43],
Pacific Ocean [30],
Afghanistan [41],
Israel [58],
Argentina [22],
Cuba [59],
Canada [10],
Germany [8],
Egypt [13],
Italy [1],
France [14].

☐ USA	☐ United Kingdom	☐ Israel	☐ Germany
☐ Russia	☐ Sweden	☐ Argentina	☐ Egypt
☐ Japan	☐ Pacific Ocean	☐ Cuba	☐ Italy
☐ Mexico	☐ Afghanistan	☐ Canada	☐ France

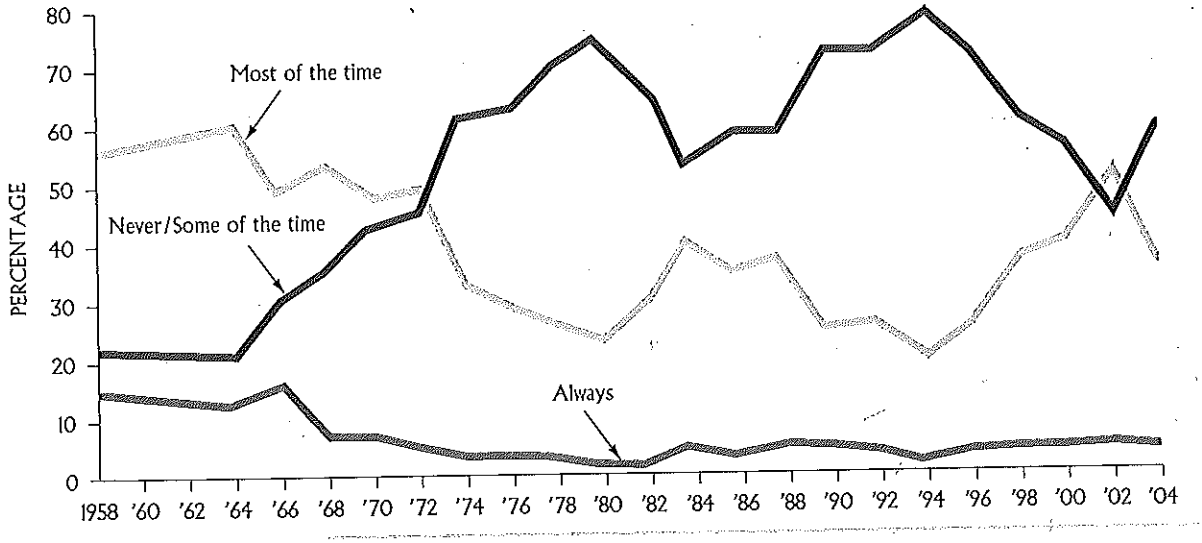
Correct answers are upside down at left.

Source: www.nationalgeographic.com

The "paradox of mass politics," says Russell Neuman, is that the American political system works as well as it does given the discomforting lack of public knowledge about politics.[22] Part of the reason for this phenomenon is that people may not know the ins and outs of policy questions or the actors on the political stage, but they know what basic values they want upheld.

Figure 6.4 The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958–2004

This graph shows how people have responded over time to the following question: How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?



Source: Authors' analysis of 1958–2002 American National Election Study data; CBS/*New York Times* Poll, July 11–15, 2004.

The Decline of Trust in Government

Sadly, the American public has become increasingly dissatisfied with government over the last four decades, as you can see in Figure 6.4. In the late 1950s and early 1960s about three-quarters of Americans said that they trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing always or mostly. Following the 1964 election, however, researchers started to see a precipitous drop in public trust in government. First Vietnam and then Watergate shook the people's confidence in the federal government. The economic troubles of the Carter years and the Iran hostage crisis helped continue the slide; by 1980, only a quarter of the public thought the government could be trusted most of the time or always. During the Reagan years, public cynicism abated a bit, but by 1994, trust in government had plummeted again to another all-time low. Since 1994, trust in government has improved somewhat, but it seems unlikely that we will see a long-lasting return to the optimistic levels of trust in government of the early 1960s. For a brief time after September 11, media polls showed trust in government had risen to nearly this level, but by the summer of 2004 trust levels were back to where they were in 1998.

Some analysts have noted that a healthy dose of public cynicism helps to keep politicians on their toes. Others, however, note that a democracy is based on the consent of the governed and that a lack of public trust in the government is a reflection of their belief that the system is not serving them well. These more pessimistic analysts have frequently wondered whether such a cynical population would unite behind their government in a national emergency. Although the decrease in political cynicism after September 11 was not too great, the fact that it occurred at all indicates that cynicism will not stop Americans from rallying behind their government in times of national crisis. Widespread political cynicism about government apparently only applies to "normal" times; it has not eroded Americans' fundamental faith in our democracy.

What Americans Value: Political Ideologies

A coherent set of values and beliefs about public policy is a political ideology. Liberal ideology, for example, supports a wide scope for the central government, often involving policies that aim to promote equality. Conservative ideology, in contrast, supports a less active scope of government that gives freer reign to the private sector. Table 6.2 attempts to summarize some of the key differences between liberals and conservatives.

political ideology

A coherent set of beliefs about politics, public policy, and public purpose. It helps give meaning to political events, personalities, and policies. See also liberalism and conservatism.

Who Are the Liberals and Conservatives?

Overall, more Americans consistently choose the ideological label of conservative over liberal. The 2000 National Annenberg Election Study found that of those who labeled themselves, 37 percent were conservatives, 40 percent were moderates, and just 23 percent were liberals. The predominance of conservative thinking in America is one of the most important reasons for the relatively restrained scope of government activities compared to most European nations.

Yet, there are some groups that are more liberal than others, and thus would generally like to see the government do more. Among people under the age of 30, there are just as many liberals as conservatives, as shown in "Young People and Politics: How Younger and Older Americans Compare on the Issues." The younger the individual, the less likely that person is to be a conservative. The fact that younger people are also less likely to vote means that conservatives are overrepresented at the polls.

Visual Literacy

Who Are Liberals and Conservatives?

Table 6.2 How To Tell a Liberal from a Conservative

Liberal and *conservative*—these labels are thrown around in American politics as though everyone knows what they mean. Here are some of the political beliefs likely to be preferred by liberals and conservatives. This table, to be sure, is oversimplified.

	LIBERALS	CONSERVATIVES
Foreign Policy		
Military spending	Believe we should spend less	Believe we should maintain peace through strength
Use of force	Less willing to commit troops to action, such as in the 2003 war with Iraq	More likely to support military intervention around the world
Social Policy		
Abortion	Support "freedom of choice"	Support "right to life"
Prayer in schools	Are opposed	Are supportive
Affirmative action	Favor	Oppose
Economic Policy		
Scope of government	View government as a regulator in the public interest	Favor free-market solutions
Taxes	Want to tax the rich more	Want to keep taxes low
Spending	Want to spend more on the poor	Want to keep spending low
Crime		
How to cut crime	Believe we should solve the problems that cause crime	Believe we should stop "coddling criminals"
Defendants' rights	Believe we should guard them carefully	Believe we should stop letting criminals hide behind laws

Young People and Politics

How Young and Old People Compare on the Issues

The following table compares young adults and senior citizens on a variety of issues. Because younger citizens are much less likely to vote than older people, the differences between the two groups give us some indication of how public opinion is not accurately reflected at the polls. As you can see, younger people are substantially more likely to call themselves liberal than senior citizens. Befitting their liberalism, they are more supportive of government policies to reduce income differences. And their spending priorities are more on the liberal side as well. They are more in favor of spending on education and environmental protection and less inclined than seniors to spend more on defense. Younger voters are also more supportive of gay rights.

However, younger people are not always more likely to take the liberal side of an issue. Younger people are more supportive of investing Social Security funds in the stock market and more in favor of schools vouchers to help parents send their children to private schools. Both of these reform proposals have been primarily championed by conservative politicians such as George W. Bush. The fact that young adults are the most likely to support them suggests that the nation's youth are most open to new ideas, be they liberal or conservative.

Questions for Discussion

- Only a few issues could be covered in this table due to space limitations. Are there other issues on which you think there are likely to be differences of opinion between young and old people?
- Do you think the differences shown above are important? If so, what difference might it make to the American political agenda if young people were to vote at the same rate as the elderly?

	18–29 YEARS OLD	65 AND OLDER
Very liberal	7	2
Liberal	25	14
Moderate	39	39
Conservative	24	38
Very conservative	5	7
Favor investing Social Security funds in the stock market	71	45
Oppose investing Social Security funds in the stock market	29	55
Favor school vouchers	44	30
Oppose school vouchers	56	70
Spending on education should be increased	81	53
Spending on education is about right	16	34
Spending on education should be reduced	3	13
Military spending should be increased	35	65
Military spending is about right	49	30
Military spending should be reduced	16	5
Favor gays in the military	64	53
Oppose gays in the military	36	47
Favor government policies to reduce income differences	61	42
Oppose government policies to reduce income differences	39	58
Spending to protect the environment should be increased	77	59
Spending to protect the environment is about right	18	28
Spending to protect the environment should be decreased	5	13

Source: 2000 National Annenberg Election Study.

In general, groups with political clout tend to be more conservative than groups whose members have often been shut out from the halls of political power. This is because excluded groups have often looked to the government to rectify the inequalities they have faced. For example, African Americans benefited from government activism in the form of the major civil rights bills of the 1960s to bring them into the mainstream of American life. Many African-American leaders currently place a high priority on retaining social welfare and affirmative action programs in order to assist their progress. It should come as little surprise then that African Americans are more liberal than the national average. Similarly, Hispanics also are less conservative than Whites, and if this pattern continues the influx of many more Hispanics into the electorate will move the country in a slightly liberal direction.

Participation

Are You a Liberal or a Conservative?

Women are not a minority group, making up about 54 percent of the population, but they have nevertheless been politically and economically disadvantaged. Compared to men, women are more likely to support spending on social services and to oppose the higher levels of military spending, which conservatives typically advocate. These issues concerning the priorities of government rather than the issue of abortion—on which men and women actually differ very little—lead women to be significantly less conservative than men. This ideological difference between men and women has led to the **gender gap**, which refers to the regular pattern by which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates. Bill Clinton carried the women's vote while Bob Dole was preferred among men in 1996, making Clinton the first president who can be said to be elected via the support of only one gender. In 2004, exit polls showed that women were about 7 percent more likely to support John Kerry than men.

gender gap

A term that refers to the regular pattern by which women are more likely to support Democratic candidates. Women tend to be significantly less conservative than men and are more likely to support spending on social services and to oppose higher levels of military spending.

The gender gap is a relatively new predictor of ideological positions, dating back only to 1980 when Ronald Reagan was first elected. A much more traditional source of division between liberals and conservatives has been financial status, or what is often known as social class. But in actuality, the relationship between family income and ideology is now relatively weak. As a result, social class has become much less predictive of political behavior than it used to be.[23]

The role of religion in influencing political ideology has also changed greatly in recent years. Catholics and Jews, as minority groups who struggled for equality, have long been more liberal than Protestants. Today, Jews remain by far the most liberal demographic group in the country.[24] However, the ideological gap between Catholics and Protestants is now smaller than the gender gap. Ideology is now determined more by religiosity—that is, the degree to which religion is important in one's life—than by religious denomination. What is known as the new Christian Right consists of Catholics and Protestants who consider themselves fundamentalists or "born again." The influx of new policy issues dealing with matters of morality and traditional family values has recently tied this aspect of religious beliefs to political ideology. Those who identify themselves as born-again Christians are currently the most conservative demographic group. On the other hand, people who say they have no religious affiliation (roughly one-tenth of the population) are more liberal than conservative.

Just as some people are very much guided by their religious beliefs whereas others are not, the same is true for political ideology. It would probably be a mistake to assume that when conservative candidates do better than they have in the past that this necessarily means people want more conservative policies, for not everyone thinks in ideological terms.

Do People Think in Ideological Terms?

The authors of the classic study *The American Voter* first examined how much people rely on ideology to guide their political thinking.[25] They divided the public into four groups, according to ideological sophistication. Their portrait of the American electorate was not flattering. Only 12 percent of the people showed evidence of thinking

in ideological terms and thus were classified as *ideologues*. These people could connect their opinions and beliefs with broad policy positions taken by parties or candidates. They might say, for example, that they liked the Democrats because they were more liberal or the Republicans because they favored a smaller government. Forty-two percent of Americans were classified as *group benefits* voters. These people thought of politics mainly in terms of the groups they liked or disliked; for example, "Republicans support small business owners like me" or "Democrats are the party of the working person." Twenty-four percent of the population were *nature of the times* voters. Their handle on politics was limited to whether the times seemed good or bad to them; they might vaguely link the party in power with the country's fortune or misfortune. Finally, 22 percent of the voters were devoid of any ideological or issue content in their political evaluations. They were called the *no issue content* group. Most of them simply voted routinely for a party or judged the candidates solely by their personalities. Overall, at least during the 1950s, Americans seemed to care little about the differences between liberal and conservative politics.

There has been much debate about whether this portrayal accurately characterizes the public today. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik took a look at the changing American voter, arguing that voters were more sophisticated in the 1970s than in the 1950s.[26] Others, though, have concluded that people only seemed more informed and ideological because the wording of the questions had changed.[27] If the exact same methods are used to update the analysis of *The American Voter* through more recent elections, one finds some increase in the proportion of ideologues, but not much. The last time these methods were employed was in 1988, and then just 18 percent were classified as ideologues, as compared to 12 percent in 1956. Given that George Bush continually labeled his 1988 opponent Michael Dukakis as "that liberal Governor from the most liberal state in the country," it is striking how few people actually evaluated the parties and candidates in ideological terms.

These findings do not mean that the vast majority of the population does not have a political ideology. Rather, for most people the terms *liberal* and *conservative* are just not as important as they are for the political elite such as politicians, activists, journalists, and the like. Relatively few people have ideologies that organize their political beliefs as clearly as shown in Table 6.2. Thus, the authors of *The American Voter* concluded that to speak of election results as indicating a movement of the public either left (to more liberal policies) or right (to more conservative policies) is not justified because most voters do not think in such terms. Furthermore, those who do are actually the least likely to shift from one election to the next. The relatively small percentage of voters who made up their minds in the last couple days of the Bush-Gore campaign in 2000 were far more concerned with integrity and competence than ideology.

How Americans Participate in Politics

In politics, as in many other aspects of life, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The way citizens "squeak" in politics is to participate. Americans have many avenues of political participation open to them.

- Mrs. Jones of Iowa City goes to a neighbor's living room to attend her local precinct's presidential caucus.
- Demonstrators against abortion protest at the Supreme Court on the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.
- Parents in Alabama file a lawsuit to oppose textbooks that, in their opinion, promote "secular humanism."
- Mr. Smith, a Social Security recipient, writes to his senator to express his concern about a possible cut in his cost-of-living benefits.
- Over 100 million people vote in a presidential election.

All these activities are types of political participation. **Political participation** encompasses the many activities in which citizens engage to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue.[28] Participation can be overt or subtle. The mass protests throughout Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989 represented an avalanche of political participation, yet quietly writing a letter to your congressperson also represents political participation. Political participation can be violent or peaceful, organized or individual, casual or consuming.

political participation

All the activities used by citizens to influence the selection of political leaders or the policies they pursue. The most common but not the only means of political participation in a democracy is voting. Other means include protest and civil disobedience.

Generally, the United States has a culture that values political participation. Americans express very high levels of pride in their democracy: 79 percent say they are proud of how democracy works in the United States[29] Nevertheless, just 55 percent of adult Americans voted in the presidential election of 2004, and only 39 percent turned out for the 2002 midterm elections. At the local level, the situation is even worse, with elections for city council and school board often drawing less than 10 percent of the eligible voters. (For more on voter turnout and why it is so low, see Chapter 10.)

Conventional Participation

Although the line is hard to draw, political scientists generally distinguish between two broad types of participation: conventional and unconventional. Conventional participation includes many widely accepted modes of influencing government—voting, trying to persuade others, ringing doorbells for a petition, running for office, and so on. In contrast, unconventional participation includes activities that are often dramatic, such as protesting, civil disobedience, and even violence.

For a few, politics is their lifeblood; they run for office, work regularly in politics, and live for the next election. The number of Americans for whom political activity is an important part of their everyday life is minuscule; they number at most in the tens of thousands. To these people, policy questions are as familiar as slogans on TV commercials are to the average citizen. They are the political elites—activists, party leaders, interest group leaders, judges, members of Congress, and other public officials. (Part 3 of this book will discuss the political elite in detail.)

Millions take part in political activities beyond simply voting. In two comprehensive studies of American political participation conducted by Sidney Verba and his colleagues, samples of Americans were asked in 1967 and 1987 about their role in various

There are many ways of participating in politics beyond voting. One conventional form of participating is to sign a petition concerning a political issue. Here, a woman in Georgia is shown signing a petition in support of public displays of the Ten Commandments.

Making a Difference

Granny D and Her Walk for Campaign Finance Reform

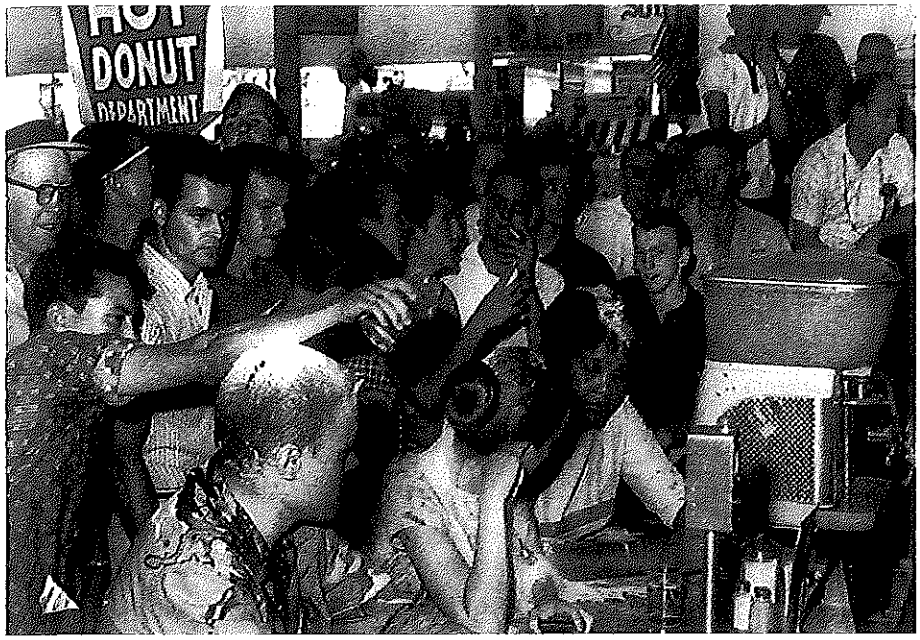
At the age of 89 Doris Haddock resolved to do something unusual that would draw people's attention to the issue of campaign finance reform: a cross-country walk from California to Washington, D.C. Moving at a pace of 10 miles per day, Granny D—the nickname Mrs. Haddock assumed for publicity purposes—soon encountered desert heat and wind that would discourage most young and healthy people from continuing. But for over a year she continued on, until she finally made it all the way to Congress' front door. Along the way, she had publicized her cause through numerous media interviews and met with various members of Congress in their local offices. Tens of thousands of ordinary citizens had come out to see her, sign her petition, and sometimes walk along with her for a while. The National Association of Secretaries of State issued a resolution commending her "for showing that one person can make a difference."

kinds of political activities.[30] Included were voting, working in campaigns, contacting government officials, and working on local community issues. Voting was the only aspect of political participation that a majority of the population reported engaging in, but also the only political activity for which there is evidence of a decline in participation in recent years. Substantial increases in participation were found on the dimensions of giving money to candidates and contacting public officials, and small increases are evident for all the other activities. Thus, although the decline of voter turnout is a development Americans should rightly be concerned about (see Chapter 10), a broader look at political participation reveals some positive developments for participatory democracy.

Protest as Participation

From the Boston Tea Party to burning draft cards, to demonstrating against abortion, Americans have engaged in countless political protests. **Protest** is a form of political participation designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics. The media's willingness to cover the unusual can make protests worthwhile, drawing attention to a point of view that many Americans might otherwise never encounter. For example, when an 89-year-old woman decided to try to walk across the country to draw attention to the need for campaign finance reform, she put this issue onto the front page of newspapers most everywhere she traveled (see "Making a Difference: Granny D and Her Walk for Campaign Finance Reform").

The right of political protest is constitutionally protected as an integral part of freedom of speech in the United States. Virtually every controversial governmental decision ends up generating some organized political protest sooner or later.



Nonviolent civil disobedience was one of the most effective techniques of the civil rights movement in the American South. Young African Americans sat at "Whites only" lunch counters to protest segregation. Photos such as this drew national attention to the injustice of racial discrimination.

Using much more flamboyant means, the AIDS activist group appropriately called "ACT-UP" interrupts political gatherings to draw attention to the need for AIDS research. In fact, protests today are often orchestrated to provide television cameras with vivid images. Demonstration coordinators steer participants to prearranged staging areas and provide facilities for press coverage.

Throughout American history, individuals and groups have sometimes used **civil disobedience** as a form of protest; that is, they have consciously broken a law that they thought was unjust. In the 1840s, Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his taxes as a protest against the Mexican War and went to jail; he stayed only overnight because his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson paid the taxes. Influenced by India's Mahatma Gandhi, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. won a Nobel Peace Prize for his civil disobedience against segregationist laws in the 1950s and 1960s. His "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a classic defense of civil disobedience.[31]

protest

A form of **political participation** designed to achieve policy change through dramatic and unconventional tactics.

civil disobedience

A form of **political participation** that reflects a conscious decision to break a law believed to be immoral and to suffer the consequences.

Perhaps the best known image of American political violence from the late 1960s to early 1970s period: A student lies dead on the Kent State campus, one of four killed when members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on anti-Vietnam War demonstrators.

How You Can Make a Difference

Getting Involved

Whether it's campaign finance reform or any other issue you feel strongly about, there are ways *you* can make a difference. First, if you have not done so already, immerse yourself in the issues. Learn the ins and outs of existing laws pertaining to the issue you are concerned about. If the issue is campaign finance, learn about the role of political action committees (PACs), campaign finance laws, and soft money. Similarly, develop a basic understanding of such corrective legislation as the McCain-Feingold Act. For information on these topics, including lists of books, federal resources, interest groups, etc., go to *www.campaignfinance.homestead.com* or go to *www.commoncause.org* for an amazing amount of easily understood and well-organized information on campaign finance reform.

Another thing to do is to join an interest group that represents your position on the issue. If you can't find one, start your own!

Find out where your congressperson and senators stand on the issue. Write, call, or e-mail their offices informing them of your position and asking them to support or introduce appropriate legislation. Keep up the writing campaign until your representative promises results.

If feasible, organize an event to garner media exposure for your views. An effective event can be anything from a classic protest march to something more original like a mock auction of congressional votes, a controversial art exhibit on special interests, or in the case of Granny D, a walk across the country. Be creative, but stay within the bounds of the law unless you are willing to pay the consequences.

Volunteer your time to support candidates who promise to legislate for the issue you hold dear. If you live in a state that allows public initiatives, start or get involved with a group to place an initiative on the ballot.

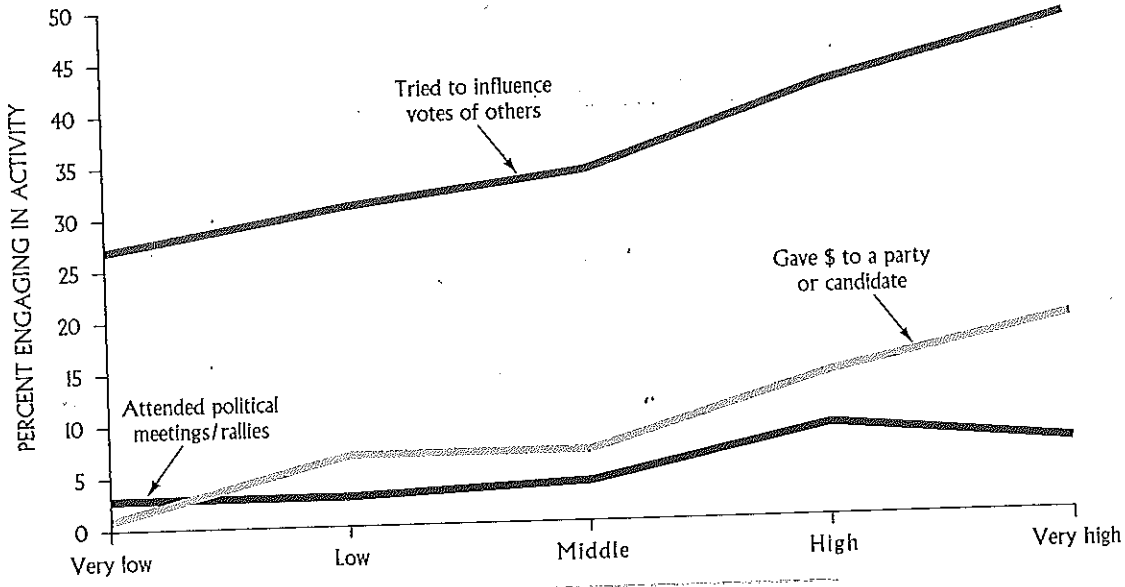
On Election Day, send a clear signal by voting for those who support what you favor.

What you can do:

- Educate yourself on issues and current legislation.
- Join an interest group that represents your position or start one of your own.
- Contact your elected representatives and know where they stand on the issues.
- When possible, organize events to get media exposure for your issue and position.
- Support political campaigns of candidates who share your views.
- Vote!

Figure 6.5 Political Participation by Family Income

The following graph shows, by their income status, the percentage of the adult population who said they participated in various forms of political activity.



Source: Authors' analysis of 2000 National Election Study data.

Sometimes political participation can be violent. The history of violence in American politics is a long one—not surprising, perhaps, for a nation born in rebellion. The turbulent 1960s included many outbreaks of violence. African-American neighborhoods in American cities were torn by riots. College campuses were sometimes turned into battle zones as protestors against the Vietnam War fought police and National Guard units. At a number of campuses, demonstrations turned violent; students were killed at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970. Although supported by few people, violence has been a means of pressuring the government to change its policies throughout American history.

Class, Inequality, and Participation

The rates of political participation are unequal among Americans. Virtually every study of political participation has come to the conclusion that "citizens of higher social economic status participate more in politics. This generalization "holds true whether one uses level of education, income, or occupation as the measure of social status."[32] Figure 6.5 presents recent evidence on this score. Note that not only are people with higher incomes more likely to donate money to campaigns, but also to participate in other ways that do not require financial resources. Theorists who believe that America is ruled by a small, wealthy elite make much of this fact to support their view.

The participation differences between African Americans and Hispanics and the national average are no longer enormous, however. For African Americans, participation in 2000 was just 12 percentage points below the national average; for Hispanic citizens it was 11 percent. One reason for this relatively small participation gap is that minorities have a group consciousness that gives them an extra incentive to vote. In fact, when African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites of equal income and education are compared, the minorities participate more in politics.[33] In other words, a poor Hispanic or African American is more likely to participate than a poor White. In general, lower rates of political participation among these minority groups are linked with lower socioeconomic status.

People who believe in the promise of democracy should definitely be concerned with the inequalities of political participation in America. Those who participate are easy to listen to; nonparticipants are easy to ignore. Just as the makers of denture cream do not worry too much about people with healthy teeth, many politicians don't concern themselves much with the views of groups with low participation rates, such as the young and people with low incomes. Who gets what in politics therefore depends in part on who participates.

Why It Matters

Political Participation

Inequality in political participation is a problem in a representative democracy. Public policy debates and outcomes would probably be substantially different if people of all age and income groups participated equally. If young adults participated more, politicians would be more inclined to work on ways by which the government could help young people get the training necessary to get good jobs. And if the poor participated at higher levels, government programs to alleviate poverty would likely be higher on the political agenda than they are today.

Understanding Public Opinion and Political Action

In 2004, many people in Iraq called for democracy in their country. Some said they wanted their political system to be like America's in the sense that ordinary people's opinions determine how the government is run. However, as this chapter has shown, there are many limits on the role public opinion plays in the American political system. The average person is not very well informed about political issues, including the crucial issue of the scope of government.

Public Attitudes Toward the Scope of Government

Central to the ideology of the Republican Party is the belief that the scope of American government has become too wide-ranging. According to Ronald Reagan, probably the most admired Republican in recent history, government was not the solution to society's

problems—it was the problem. He called for the government to "get off the backs of the American people."

Reagan's rhetoric about an overly intrusive government was reminiscent of the 1964 presidential campaign rhetoric of Barry Goldwater, who lost to Lyndon Johnson in a landslide. Indeed, Reagan first made his mark in politics by giving a televised speech on behalf of the embattled Goldwater campaign. Although the rhetoric was much the same when Ronald Reagan was first elected president in 1980, public opinion about the scope of government had changed dramatically. In 1964, only 30 percent of the population thought the government was getting too powerful; by 1980, this figure had risen to 50 percent.

For much of the population, however, questions about the scope of government have consistently elicited no opinion at all. Indeed, when this question was last asked in the 2000 National Election Study, 42 percent of those interviewed said they had not thought about the question (among those under 25 years of age, this figure was 60 percent). The question of government power is a complex one, but as *Government in America* will continue to emphasize, it is one of the key controversies in American politics today. Once again, it seems that the public is not nearly so concerned with political issues as would be ideal in a democratic society.

Nor does public opinion on different aspects of the same issue exhibit much consistency. Thus, although more people today think the government is too active, a plurality has consistently called for more spending on such programs as education, health care, aid to big cities, protecting the environment, and fighting crime. Many political scientists have looked at these contradictory findings and concluded that Americans are ideological conservatives but operational liberals—meaning that they oppose the idea of big government in principle but favor it in practice. The fact that public opinion is often contradictory in this respect contributes to policy gridlock because it is hard for politicians to know which aspect of the public's attitudes to respond to.

Democracy, Public Opinion, and Political Action

Comparative
Comparing Public Opinion

Remember, though, that American democracy is representative rather than direct. As *The American Voter* stated many years ago, "The public's explicit task is to decide not what government shall do but rather who shall decide what government shall do."[34] When individuals under communist rule protested for democracy, what they wanted most was the right to have a say in choosing their leaders. Americans can—and often do—take for granted the opportunity to replace their leaders at the next election. Protest is thus directed at making the government listen to specific demands, not overthrowing it. In this sense, it can be said that American citizens have become well socialized to democracy.

If the public's task in democracy is to choose who is to lead, we must still ask whether it can do so wisely. If people know little about where candidates stand on issues, how can they make rational choices? Most choose performance criteria over policy criteria. As Morris Fiorina has written, citizens typically have one hard bit of data to go on: "They know what life has been like during the incumbent's administration. They need not know the precise economic or foreign policies of the incumbent administration in order to see or feel the results of those policies."[35] Thus, even if they are only voting according to the nature of the times, their voices are clearly being heard—holding public officials accountable for their actions.

Summary

American society is amazingly varied. The ethnic makeup of America is changing to a minority majority. Americans are moving toward warmer parts of the country and growing older as a society. All these changes have policy consequences. One way of understanding the American people is through demography—the science of population changes. Demography, it is often said, is destiny.

Another way to understand the American people is through examination of public opinion in the United States. What Americans believe—and what they believe they know—is public opinion, the distribution of people's beliefs about politics and policy issues. Polling is one important way of studying public opinion; polls give us a fairly accurate gauge of public opinion on issues, products, and personalities. On the positive side for democracy, polls help keep political leaders in touch with the feelings of their constituents. On the negative side, polls may lead politicians to "play to the crowds" instead of providing leadership.

Polls have revealed again and again that the average American has a low level of political knowledge. Far more Americans know their astrological sign than know the names of their representatives in Congress. Ideological thinking is not widespread in the American public, nor are people necessarily consistent in their attitudes. Often they are conservative in principle but liberal in practice; that is, they are against big government but favor more spending on a wide variety of programs.

Acting on one's opinions is political participation. Although Americans live in a participatory culture, their actual level of participation is less than spectacular. In this country, participation is a class-biased activity; certain groups participate more than others. Those who suffer the most inequality sometimes resort to protest as a form of participation. Perhaps the best indicator of how well socialized Americans are to democracy is that protest typically is aimed at getting the attention of the government, not overthrowing it.

Key Terms

public opinion
demography
census
melting pot
minority majority
political culture
reapportionment
political socialization
sample
random sampling
sampling error
random-digit dialing
exit poll
political ideology
gender gap
political participation
protest
civil disobedience

Internet Resources

www.census.gov
The census is the best source of information on America's demography. Go to the list of topics to find out the range of materials that are available.

www.gallup.com
The Gallup poll regularly posts reports about their political surveys at this site.

www.census.gov/statab/www/
The *Statistical Abstract of the United States* contains a wealth of demographic and political information and is available in Adobe Acrobat format off the Internet.

www.demographics.com/publications/ad/index.htm
American Demographics magazine publishes many interesting stories summarizing how America's population is currently changing.

Get Connected

Public Opinion and SLOPs

Public opinion polls play an important role in American politics and government. Some observers even argue that policymakers keep an eye on polls when trying to develop policy, a practice that may be to the detriment of our system of government. Some polls are conducted scientifically and provide useful information about what Americans are thinking. There are other polls called self-selected opinion polls, or SLOPs, that may provide biased or misleading information. You may have seen SLOPs on an interest group's website or even on the local news. How are scientific polls conducted and how do they differ from SLOPs?

Search the Web

The Gallup Organization is one of the oldest public opinion polling firms in the country. Go to the "How Polls are Conducted" page at the Gallup website: *http://www.gallup.com/help/FAQs/poll1.asp*. Now review the National Council on Public Polls' "Statement about Internet Polls" *http://www.ncpp.org/internet.htm*. While the National Council on Public Polls' statement is about Internet polls, this type of public opinion poll could have the same shortcomings as the self-selected opinion poll you might see on television or find on an interest group's website.

Questions to Ask

- What are the important characteristics about Gallup's polling methods that allow people to have confidence in the findings revealed by the organization's polls?
- Why does the National Council on Public Polls think it is important to know if people were able to participate in the poll more than once?
- What are the shortcomings of any public opinion poll?

Why It Matters

The people are able to voice their opinions through public opinion polls, but polls may cause problems for our political system if they are not conducted correctly. It is important for the consumers of public opinion polls, including policymakers and voters, to have confidence in the information such polls present.

Get Involved

Find the results of an Internet poll at the CNN website (*http://www.cnn.com*), Fox News Channel's website (*http://www.foxnews.com*), or in your local media. Interest groups also run Internet polls. A list of interest groups and their web addresses can be found at *http://www.csuchico.edu/~kcfount/index.html*. Evaluate the poll using the National Council on Public Polls' "Statement about Internet Polls." Contact the person or group who published the poll and ask them to answer the questions on the statement if the poll doesn't provide the answers directly. Consult this issue brief from The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press *http://people-press.org/commentary/ display.php3?AnalysisID=20* to offer suggestions on how to improve the poll.

To see more Get Connected exercises for Chapter 6, go to www.ablongman.com/edwards.

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